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THE VERB AND THE ADJECTIVE IN POETRY

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I

“To dwell especially upon the verbs and the adjectives in poetry is in general to dwell upon the significant combinations effected by the poet. And to enable the mind of the pupil imaginatively to comprehend these new combinations, to help him actually to realize them in his own consciousness, is to elevate that consciousness from the plane of mistaken conceptions, false ideals, and untruth to the plane of universal law. It is to transform, temporarily it may be, but still for the moment to transform, the boy whom we may know simply as ‘Tom Smith’ into a part of universal humanity. No task is more difficult to achieve; none could be more worthy. In the successful accomplishment of it, in the pupil’s joyous attainment of it, lies all there is or ever can be in the teaching of poetry.”¹

May I be permitted to quote these words of my own to introduce to you a subject which is to me of far-reaching significance and importance? It is not too much to say, I believe, that in the making of poetry, in the study of it, and in the teaching of it, the parts of speech of distinctive consequence are the verb and the adjective. I speak not of grammatical analysis and the parsing of poetry; that, fortunately, has been relegated to its proper mediaeval past. I speak of the verb and the adjective as related to other parts of speech simply as tools of language. And I hold that the true end of poetry is not a knowledge of words and their relations, not a code of morals, not a set of ideas, not even a knowledge of how to use one’s hands and feet, but just that for which the poet makes his poem, the joy of the poetic experience. From this point of view I hope to suggest thought upon two things: first, some

¹ *The Teaching of Poetry in the High School*, pp. 125-26.

reasons why the verb and the adjective assume such importance in poetry; and second, the significance these reasons have for our conception of the nature of poetry and for the teaching of it.

But, first, a little more clearly, the fact itself: turn where you will in poetry, the phrases and lines selected as of poetic value achieve their quality through the distinctive use of verb and adjective. Consider such expressions as: "death's dateless night"; "guilty doors"; "careless wind"; "sweaty haste"; "brooding years"; "bitter hug of mortality"; "the hour steals on"; "Death, that feeds on men"; and such lines as:

"Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments"

"Break, thou deep vase of chilling tears,
That grief hath shaken into frost!"

"She stood in tears amid the alien corn"

"Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time"

" . . . the murmuring surge,
That on the unnumber'd idle pebbles chafes."

In these lines and expressions the nouns are all familiar enough; there is nothing unique or distinctive about them. Death, night, door, hour, glass, vase, tears, stone, pebbles: all are so familiar that we use them in our daily talk. It is the verbs and the adjectives that lend to these lines and expressions their touch of excellence and quality. The force, power, and beauty of each phrase, expression, and line grow out of the poet's use of adjective or of verb or of both. It is so everywhere in poetry.

II

To examine all the reasons why this is so would carry us far afield in poetic theory. We may more conveniently deal with certain marks of poetical lines and expressions themselves. Of these I shall mention three: their personalized quality; the law of their unity; and their relative instability. Each vitally concerns the verb and the adjective in poetry.

To appreciate what is meant by the personalized quality of the poet's phrases, it is necessary first to realize that the poet's point

of view differs from that of most men. Most men are dominated by what they call a practical point of view. They ask, naturally enough for their purposes: What is the use of this to me now? Trees, however beautiful, are for lumber and fuel; waterfalls, however magnificent, for power and light; meadows, however lovely, for crops and the fruits of commerce; men, very often, are laboring and commercial entities, not human beings. Everything is measured by its immediate usefulness and service. The poet's point of view is different. He is free from the thought of immediate use, service, or ownership. His is a disinterested view. When he sees a field of grain on the hillside by a lake, he does not think of it as a crop; he sees only how

"The sylvan slopes with corn-clad fields
Are hung, as if with golden shields,
Bright trophies in the sun."

When he sees a tree bare of its leaves, he does not think of the quantity of fruit or the amount of building material or fuel it may afford; he compares it with a ruined choir, where late the sweet birds sang. When he sees a cloud, he does not regard it as a mere presage of weather; he thinks of it as "labouring," and "resting" on the mountain-tops, or as bringing "fresh showers for the thirsting flowers," and laughing as it passes in thunder. The poet has "precious feelings of disinterested, that is, self-disregarding joy and love," as Wordsworth characterizes it.

In consequence of this greater freedom, the poet puts more of his life into persons and things than does the ordinary man. He personalizes them. The poet, says Keats, is "continually in, for, and filling some other body"; he has no identity of his own; and he confirms his statement when he says elsewhere: "If a sparrow come before my window, I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel." Looking at a picture of some sheep by the painter Roos, Goethe said they excited such sympathy in him that he feared he might become a sheep, and almost thought the artist must have been one. Wordsworth tells us how he communed with all that he saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, his own material nature. "Many times while going to school," he says, "have I grasped at a wall or a tree to recall myself from this abyss of ideal-

ism to the reality." With an abandon impossible to the ordinary man, the poet puts his life into persons and things about him; he projects himself into them; he infuses and breathes life into everything with which he comes into contact: Wordsworth, into objects in nature; Shakespeare, into man; Milton, into the supernatural. Each casts his bread upon the waters of life.

Nor does he fail to find it after many days. Images that come to the poet's mind are, in consequence, vivid, full, intense, and active. They are clearer and richer than are those of most men. So, "sharp" frosts "constrain" the earth until a "kindly" thaw "unlocks" it with "mild" rain; the "tender" blade "peeps" up to "birth," and straight the green fields "laugh" with "promised" grain; Autumn sits "careless on a granary floor" "drows'd with the fume of poppies"; the floods "clap their hands," and the mountains "break forth into harmony." Everywhere the images used by the poet have more distinctness and color than have the images of most men; they are fuller, richer, more vivid. They are more highly personalized.

The grouping of these personalized images is not fortuitous. It takes place according to law. The unity of phrase, of line, of poem indeed, is grounded upon principle. That law or principle is the law of similarity. Like suggests like in consciousness: there is a reciprocal suggestion of like things; there is an attraction of similars. This is the invariable rule.

For this law or principle there are two main spheres of application: one is the practical, the physical, or the biological, as one may choose to call it; the other is the artistic, the ideal, or the mental and spiritual. The difference is significant. In the practical sphere, the child soon learns that a gas flame, a red coal, and a "live" wire all "burn"; that they possess a "like" quality. The merchant who escapes failure is the one who anticipates similarity or likeness between the color and fabric of his goods and the taste and wishes of his prospective customer. In science, even, we accept the theory of evolution in preference to others only because it brings the largest number of the facts of life into significant relation; it binds them together on a basis of similarity.

All such groupings, even those in science, are made that man may live; that he may sustain his life; that he may perpetuate himself. But man's real life is in his character, not in his body. Unlike the animal, man is not satisfied with fulness. He has wants and needs of his inner life that cry out with no less imperative call for satisfaction than do his physical needs. These needs and wants the poet attempts to satisfy by grouping images of things and persons in terms of a less evident, a more significant, a universal, similarity. Disregarding accidental relations of time and space, he groups images of things and persons in terms of a fundamental similarity. He unfolds some inner, central, universal principle of life that ejects error and reveals truth.

Consider the expression, "the murmuring surge that on the unnumbered idle pebbles chafes." We have all seen the restless, never-ending movement of the ocean waves as they break upon the shore, seeming to resent the limits of their confines. And we know what it is to chafe. We have seen people and animals show irritation and fret under restraint. But we have never connected these two. We have never perceived their similarity. Then, as we read the poet's phrase, "the . . . surge . . . chafes," the images fall into harmonious unity; they are blended together into an illuminating form. So, too, we have seen idle people; we have been idle ourselves; we know what idleness is. And we have seen a pebble on the shore tossed, now this way, now that, as the waves rolled in and out, never reaching any place of rest, wearing itself out in purposeless movement. But the similarity between these two we had never perceived until we came upon the poet's phrase, "idle pebbles." Now, as never before, we understand a pebble on the seashore; we understand idleness; we understand life itself the better. Moved by his perception of the inner life of things, of their essential, as contrasted with their accidental relations; stirred by his recognition of their deeper forms of service—service, not to his body but to his mind—the poet groups into significant form images of things and persons into which he has poured his life. Experiences half-forgotten in the passing of the years; thoughts, feelings, and aspirations that have slipped the cog of memory; reminiscences of high and lofty pleasures that have

grown dim and faded; the silent and faintly perceived yearnings of the heart; the powerful impression of truth and beauty of last week—all are grouped, in the form of imagery, into a new organic unit. As if by magic, experiences, separated perhaps by years, fall into a new, delightful, and revealing unity. The similarity in terms of which the poet groups and unifies his personalized images is one that serves life by revealing significant and fundamental relations among things, among people, in life itself.

Then comes the paradox. The groupings of images made by the poet, groupings revealing the inner life of things and effected through a significant similarity, are marked by relative instability. On the physical plane there is no breaking up of important image-units. Nature sees to that or takes her swift revenge. And some few things revealed by the poet we succeed in weaving into the fabric of daily life. But the more subtle and tenuous relations escape us. In all their higher forms the poet's groupings of images are marked by instability. They are fleeting, not lasting. We win them for a moment; possess them with joy; and in a trice they are gone. Why should it be so?

Let us see more precisely, first, what this grouping of images by the poet really is. A moment's reflection makes it clear that the individual images are really bits of the poet's personality. For into what they represent he has poured his life; his images are surcharged with personality. To break up the customary arrangement of these images; to regroup them; to bring them into unity according to eternal law rather than accidental circumstance is, accordingly, to effect a reconstruction of personality. As the poet brings images of things and persons, separated in life by time and space, into organic relation, he knits up hitherto unrelated bits of his own personality into a new and truthful whole. He extends the area of his own personality; builds it up into something more than it has been, something newer, bigger, and better; elevates it off the plane of chance and accident to the plane of lofty and universal truth. Conforming to universal laws of character and personality, he projects life along new lines; he effects a furtherance of experience. And what he does for himself he makes possible for his reader.

Still more: poet and reader, in the moment of full poetic experience, when vivid images have fallen happily into a new unit, alike *become* that which has been conceived in imagination. The child in the nursery *is* the giant, the bear, the engineer his imagination has conceived; to the point of tears he insists upon the reality of his treasured joy. Even so he who reads Wordsworth's *Green Linnet* poetically has the joy of springtide in his heart, though the snow be beating against his door. To read the *Ode to Duty* poetically is to slip away unconsciously from the usual thought of duty as irksome, annoying, pleasure-destroying, to an imaginative, joyous realization of true freedom as slavery to duty. To follow *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* is not only to construct in imagination the counterpart of the misapprehended purpose and the unhappy failure of the central characters; it is actually to *become* in imagination the ideal that is set up. So long as the poetic experience lasts, so long as the glow of joyous feeling is strong, poet and reader actually become in imagination their own ideal and potential selves. Each *is*, according to the character and range of the poem or play, something that he has conceived. In consciousness, in mind and soul, not in reality, not in the world of action as yet, he *is* for the moment his ideal self.

The irony in this rare and joyous achievement is its relative instability. One moment we become the ideal; the next it slips from us and is gone. And the reason is that behind the poet's combinations of images there is no physical compulsion. Nature forces man to learn that fire burns and that a stone is hard; she compels his groupings in chemistry or in physics. But in the sphere of character there is no such compulsion. Even the most significant and beautiful groupings of images, as we know, tend to break down with disquieting, almost terrifying, rapidity. It is hard, if not impossible, to hold oneself up to Wordsworth's high conception of duty, or to maintain consistently the lofty idealism of the true Hamlet. Yet, if the poets are true, we must needs do so, frequently at least, if we are to escape error and tragic waste in life. The most difficult of tasks, the poet tells us, is

. . . . to keep

Heights which the soul is competent to gain.

Everywhere the poet's finest creations in phrase and line are marked by relative instability.

III

With each of these marks of the poetical line and phrase the verb and the adjective are inseparably connected. Through verb and through adjective appear the personalized quality of the images of things and persons used by the poet; and this personalized quality is unique and distinctive. By means of verb and adjective is effected and signified the similarity that is the fundamental principle which makes the organic and artistic unit what it is. And in the instability of that unit as a permanent form of experience lies just that which gives the poet's verb and adjective, as compared with those we use every day, their appealing quality. These are the more evident and important reasons why the verb and the adjective assume the importance they do in poetry.

But these reasons go beyond themselves in the significance they have for our conception of the nature of poetry and for the teaching of it. I can suggest only a few points on each.

In the first place, we see more clearly what the nature of poetry is. Poems are not found on the printed page; they are not found in books. Nor do they inhere in language. The spoken word has here no virtue over the written word. A poem is a state of mind. It is made up of a group of personalized images, grouped primarily through verb and adjective, in terms of similarity, into an organic unit, and resulting in an unstable but deeply pleasurable and recognizable state known as the poetic experience. Poetry, as one of the arts, represents, alike for individual and society, the means of meeting the needs of man's inner life. It is a means, the more effective because pleasurable, of furthering personality; of extending the reaches of character; of unfolding to man the promises and possibilities of his own life. Poetry begins precisely where life itself falls off and fails; carries it on to successful issue; completes its partial achievements; reconciles its failures; and brings its ideals to the verge of practical attainment by establishing them in consciousness.

From this point of view, forms of poetry differ in value. One suggestion must here suffice. All poems in which the images are

grouped primarily according to the succession of their time order are of secondary worth. Narrative poems, what I may call memory poems, and all poems of a reminiscent nature fall in this class. *The Lady of the Lake* is relatively inferior to *Macbeth*, not because the one is a narrative poem and the other a tragedy, not because the one was written by Scott and the other by Shakespeare, but because the one groups images of things and men primarily in a time order, while the other groups images of the same kind in terms of a fundamental similarity. Always for supreme greatness in poetry, there must be some significant grouping of images according to fundamental similarity, some projection of unattained forms of life into concrete representation. Always there must be something to which the mind at its best may climb, not merely follow in pleasant reminiscence; something that will reveal man's potentialities to himself.

Practically and pedagogically the significance is equally far-reaching. One or two suggestions will point the way.

First, in terms of parts of speech, it is evident that the verb and the adjective are the most important. They are the most significant *relating* parts of speech. Even nouns in poetry are of secondary importance. Further, no poem or group of poems containing a high percentage of nouns unfamiliar to pupils at any one stage should be selected for study, not because it is difficult to learn what unfamiliar nouns stand for, but because the double demand of becoming familiar with these nouns and grouping their corresponding images into organic units overtaxes attention and kills pleasure. As a rule, the simpler and more familiar the nouns the better. Often it is best to become familiar with them outside the poem entirely.

Second, to dwell especially upon the verb and the adjective in teaching poetry is to adopt the most direct and effective means afforded by poetry for intellectual and emotional discipline. For pupil, as for poet, each image is a bit of personality. To follow the poet's grouping is, accordingly, in some degree to duplicate the ideal attainment in character achieved by the poet. Bad taste, commonplace conceptions, inferior ideals, are unconsciously lost sight of by the pupil as he rises in joyous enthusiasm to the appeal-

ing quality of the poet's imaginative constructions. Studied in its ideal form, poetry frees the mind of the pupil from a weak sensuousness; effects, through imagination, an expansion of his inner life; brings into fuller clearness his relation to the world; helps prepare him to meet the needs of his time; and deepens his capacity for enjoyment in all its higher forms.

Third, the strongest guaranty, the richest promise, the fullest measure of hope for right action lies in the imaginative achievements produced through poetry. What the pupil achieves in imagination he tends to express in action. Following, duplicating, in some degree, the imaginative constructions of the poet, he becomes, in the moment of his joy, the ideal involved. He is brought to the verge of right action—a mental state in which the action is thought of as performed.

Fourth, because the groupings effected by the poet and attained by the reader are relatively unstable and disintegrate rapidly, any poem, the involved ideal of which is not readily attained, should be read again and again. It should be memorized. It is only part justification to say that we should memorize poetry because it is a good thing to store the mind with beautiful images and thoughts; because poetry is reputed to have a refining influence upon taste and language. The true reason lies deeper. For this reason, all but the simplest poems read in the first year of grade or high school should be read again in the last year, and as many times as possible in between. Still more, in the measure in which the ideal of a poem relates to the next important stage of growth of character and personality, the poem should be memorized.

Fifth, nine-tenths of the questions we ask in the teaching of poetry should center about the verb and the adjective.

And finally, in spite of the apparent contradiction involved, the best things contributed to the class study of any poem are the things that are never said. The most eloquent of these will always lie behind the illuminating discussion of some happy choice by the poet of adjective or of verb.